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Drive to fix levees boosted

Congressional team, after tour, vows to seek more funding.

By Deb Kollars -- Bee Staff Writer

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Setting it straight: *A story on Page A1 Thursday about congressional leaders on a helicopter tour of the region's river levees incorrectly identified Dianne Feinstein. She is a U.S. senator.*

A helicopter tour Wednesday of the region's river levees so punctuated the flooding risks in the capital that state Sen. Dianne Feinstein and other congressional leaders vowed to seek emergency funding in Washington and to help Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger get a state bond issue passed.

The aerial excursion over the American, Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers was an eye-opener.

"You can have all of that area inundated by water?" Feinstein asked through her on-board headset as she passed over the southern end of Natomas, a growing region north of downtown vulnerable to deep flooding.

While in the air, the Democratic senator turned from asking technical questions about levees to asking her seatmate, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, whether he thought they could secure \$36 million in extra federal dollars to help with a package of urgent levee repairs in Sacramento.

By the time they hit the ground, the two were talking strategies for getting it done.

Area flood control agencies received close to \$40 million in federal funds for the current year, said a spokeswoman for Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, who joined her congressional colleagues on the tour. But the agencies needed almost twice that much to complete the work they were ready to do this year.

If the supplemental funding can be secured through an emergency appropriation bill - Pombo and Feinstein stressed it would be difficult in the tight budget climate - it would include \$17 million for Pocket-area levees. Right now, the neighborhood does not even have the 100-year protection considered minimal by federal standards.

"We think that's an emergency," Feinstein said during a news conference on a Pocket levee following the tour. "We will try very hard to get it."

Feinstein, Pombo and Matsui were among a contingent of elected officials who joined the Republican governor in what was billed as a bipartisan effort to find solutions for Sacramento's flood control problems.

Others on Wednesday's tour: Rep. Dan Lungren, R-Gold River, Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo and a representative for California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer. Leaders for the state Department of Water Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency also took part.

The group rode in two National Guard Blackhawk helicopters that took off from Mather Field. The choppers swept over Sacramento's downtown, east Sacramento and South Land Park, flew above farmlands and islands in the Delta, then headed back north and landed in Garcia Bend Park in the Pocket about an hour later.

To address the needs in these areas, Schwarzenegger is pushing a state bond package that would raise \$2.5 billion for flood control over 10 years. Feinstein said she and other congressional representatives would work to help him pass it, saying the more the state raises toward flood control work, the easier it will be to get federal matching dollars.

Schwarzenegger estimated as much as \$8 billion will be needed to improve flood control in Sacramento and the Delta.

"We are one storm, one big earthquake away from a catastrophe," the governor said.

Fargo and the U.S. lawmakers said the level of federal interest in Sacramento's flood risks is growing, especially after the flooding in New Orleans.

Pombo and Lungren noted that this weekend, Rep. John Doolittle, R-Roseville, will show area levees and dams to colleagues Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands, and Republican Rep. Dave Hobson from Ohio. The two hold key positions: Lewis chairs the Appropriations Committee, which funds federal programs, and Hobson heads the Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water, a gatekeeping body for flood control projects.

"This is a major problem not just for the city of Sacramento but for the state of California and the entire country," Pombo said.

Lungren agreed, saying it is critical for area politicians at all levels to work together. He noted that 20 years ago, such an approach brought a \$1.4 billion flood control project to the Santa Ana River in Southern California.

To read "Tempting Fate," our examination of the region's flood risks, see www.sacbee.com/content/news/projects/flooding

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